

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 006097

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR PRM

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/23/2015

TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [TH](#) [KN](#) [DPRK](#)

SUBJECT: RESPONSE ON OPPORTUNITIES IN THAILAND TO ASSIST  
NORTH KOREAN ASYLUM SEEKERS

REF: A. A. SECSTATE 172010

[1](#)B. B. BANGKOK 000484

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR SUSAN M. SUTTON FOR REASONS  
1.5 (B,D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Both Thai and local UNHCR officials judge that the current, informal pipeline that funnels North Korean asylum seekers through UNHCR and on to the ROK embassy for swift and quiet resettlement continues to work well. According to Thai officials, any future USG efforts to accept North Koreans in Thailand would be "very, very difficult" for the RTG to consider, given their emphasis on speed and discretion in removing North Koreans from Thailand, and the RTG's current effort to serve as a bridge between Pyongyang and the United States. As one Thai official stated, the RTG does not want to become a "magnet" for North Koreans and his government wants policy to "stay as it is." End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Embassy officers met with several UNHCR and RTG officials to informally discuss the status of North Korean asylum seekers in Thailand. Both senior and mid-level Thai officials in the National Security Council and Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasized that they do not want North Koreans to come to Thailand, but that the current ROK pipeline is allowed to continue because it allows for the swift, discreet relocation of a modest number of North Koreans. The following are responses to questions in ref A.

-- Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 refugee convention and North Korean asylum seekers in Thailand are not granted any special international refugee status. The RTG, however, allows UNHCR and the ROK Embassy to operate an informal pipeline that moves North Koreans onward to South Korea. North Koreans who are arrested in Thailand and placed in immigration detention--as well as those that remain free and contact local South Korean religious and NGO groups--are quickly put in contact with UNHCR, which verifies their nationality, obtains basic biodata, and determines if they are interested in resettlement in the ROK. Once these conditions have been met, UNHCR then refers these cases to the ROK Embassy, which provides travel documents and other support for onward relocation to South Korea. UNHCR sees no reason to do formal status determinations on these cases because the South Korean Embassy has said it will take all North Koreans, and ROK nationality is more protective than any status UNHCR can offer. North Koreans in Thailand do not enjoy any special rights under Thai law, and the current UNHCR/ROK pipeline is not specifically authorized by law or statute, but by informal agreement with the RTG. There have been no cases of refoulement, and no other asylum-seeking group is afforded such reliable assistance.

-- North Koreans in Thailand do not experience any particular vulnerability or protection issue.

-- RTG officials have made clear their extreme reluctance to entertain the idea of USG processing of North Koreans in Thailand. A senior NSC official told Polcouns and visiting EAP/MLS Director that the RTG does not want North Koreans to come to, or transit, Thailand. Given the reality of some North Koreans entering the country, the RTG permits the pipeline to function because it is a quick solution to the problem. Separately, a mid-level MFA official told acting Refcood that Thailand does not want to become a "magnet" for North Koreans, and that any USG role would likely lead to such. He explained that Thailand is trying to serve as a link between the "free world" and the DPRK, and that any publicity about or increase in the number of North Korean illegals entering Thailand could put this policy in jeopardy (Note: and may threaten the current pipeline as well. End Note). It would be "very, very difficult" for the RTG to accept such a USG role. Thai officials want policy to "stay as it is."

-- Given concerns outlined in answer above, NSC officials explained that they would not be "comfortable" with any USG increases in assistance for North Koreans in Thailand. North Korean asylum cases handled by the pipeline result in relocation to ROK within "days," according to UNHCR and thus little assistance is required. Per ref B, South Korean Embassy officials have told us that they, in concert with religious groups, provide adequate food, clothing, and housing for North Koreans asylum seekers in Thailand.

-- The RTG is unlikely to welcome USG support for providing protection and assistance to North Korean asylum seekers in Thailand.

13. (C) Comment. Our Thai and UNHCR interlocutors have responded to our informal inquiries with the message "if it isn't broken, why fix it?" Behind the Thai response, however, lies an equally important difference of perspective. As successful as the current pipeline may be at affording North Koreans safehaven from the horrors of their own country, it plays a different role for the RTG. The Thai have long struggled to deal with refugees crossing over from neighboring Burma, Cambodia and Laos. The prospect of a new wave of North Koreans settling in Thailand and awaiting a long and uncertain processing period fills them with understandable apprehension, especially given the geopolitical sensitivities involved. For them, the current pipeline is less about helping North Koreans than helping the Thai avoid a new, more difficult refugee problem.

BOYCE